

Standards for a High-Quality Individual Review Form (IRF)

The comments from the IRF will serve as the basis for the panel discussion and the documentation for the assessment of the application, and will be provided to the applicant as feedback from the peer review process. The comments may also be released to the public in response to official Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests. The completeness and quality of these comments, as well as the alignment between the Ratings and comments, are extremely important. They must be appropriate, useful, and clearly correspond with the Selection Criteria that Reviewers are assessing. Provided below is guidance on *writing meaningful comments*.

Writing Meaningful Comments

- **Base the assessment only on the information provided in the reviewed application.** Do not include information from outside sources or about the applicant's known reputation. Also refrain from comparing one application to another.
- **Present evaluative language instead of a summary of details from the application.** Provide specific feedback about the application, such as an assessment of the application's strengths and weaknesses or how well the applicant addressed the requirements with the information they provided.
- **Phrase deficiencies in the application appropriately.** Avoid making suggestions for improvement and resist the urge to tell the applicant what would have made the proposal better. Instead, tell the applicant what was lacking and how this omission affected the proposal.
- **Do not use inflammatory or inappropriate statements.** Exercise care when drafting an assessment.. Do not leave questions in the comments, and avoid harsh tones, exclamation points, and/or overly broad statements. Do not refer to the "grant writer", "the panel", or any other perspective. All references should be made in reference to "the applicant" (beneficiaries, Members, etc.) for the application, etc.

Examples of inflammatory or inappropriate language:

Why did the applicant not respond to the majority of the Criteria?

In my opinion, the evidence was very strong and substantiated their claims,

The evidence in support of the identified need was virtually non-existent.

The applicant never clearly stated who the target population was, don't know how this made it to peer review!

The grant writer was slick and creative, but there was little substance to the proposal.

- **Write in complete sentences and use correct grammar and spelling.** Use spell check and reread the assessment after it has been completed. Be sure that it is clear and well-written.
- **Only use comments to address the School Turnaround AmeriCorps Selection Criteria; do not comment on other random or irrelevant aspects of the proposal.**
- **Limit comments to the strengths and weaknesses of the application, and utilize the indicators (+) (-) before each statement for clarity.** Take care to ensure that the strengths and weaknesses do not contradict each other. If there are strong and weak aspects of a Criterion, phrase the comments appropriately.
*i.e. **INCORRECT:** (+/-) While the applicant proposed a comprehensive activity to engage AmeriCorps Members and create a positive service experience, the proposed leader of these activities was one of the AmeriCorps members, instead of a qualified instructor or motivational figure.*

CORRECT: (+) *The applicant proposed a comprehensive activity to engage AmeriCorps Members and create a positive service experience.*

(-) *The proposed leader of the activities for a positive service experience was one of the AmeriCorps members, instead of a qualified instructor or motivational figure.*

- **Align the selected Rating with the comments provided for each section.**
- **Include one “return” between different comments.** Do not jumble all comments together in a single paragraph.

Characteristics of High Quality Comments

- Quantity does not equal quality. There is not a prescribed number of comments that are required for each section. The comments should be significant strengths or weaknesses, and address the Selection Criteria. There is also no prescribed length of a comment. Often, brevity lends more to clarity than lengthy comments.
- Keep comments focused on significant strengths and weaknesses (i.e. strengths and weaknesses that have an impact on the selected Rating).
 - Significant Strength or Weakness: An identified Strength or Weakness that **has an effect on the overall quality of the applicant’s response to the Criteria.** A significant Strength or Weakness often shows that the applicant has an understanding (or lack) of, a key issue in program implementation or management.
- Keep clear the difference between comments based on fact and those based on professional judgment (both are helpful, but the distinction is necessary).
- Comments should include evidence or an evaluation, rather than a reiteration or summary of what is in the application.

Characteristics of Low Quality Comments

- There is little or no relevant information to connect the statement to a particular application. The comment is generic and can be read to apply to any application.
- Comment includes a large portion of information that was copied directly from the application.
- There is little or no relevant information to indicate overall quality of the section.
- The sentence is long and confusing, so that the assessment is altogether unclear.
- There is little documentation or no evidence provided about what was strong/weak, or how it was good/bad.
- Comments are ambiguous and not clearly related to the Selection Criteria.
- Comments contain judgments that are outside the scope of responsibility of the Reviewer (i.e., commenting that the program has received more than its fair share of funding).
- Comments contain questions, page numbers, suggestions or recommendations for improvements. (these are discouraged, as it is often difficult for Reviewers to capture constructive, evaluative comments when these formats are used.)
- Comments are facetious, pejorative, or otherwise inappropriate or unprofessional.